

The problem with the United States' unshakeable backing of the Philippines

Christine Guluzian

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Despite the Philippines' president, Rodrigo Duterte, throwing a series of lambasts and insults Washington's way, the United States has continuously reassured the Philippines of its solid commitment to the U.S.-Philippines alliance.

Perhaps emboldened by the unshakeable backing of a major powerful ally, Duterte seems increasingly unconcerned with the moral or legal ramifications of condoning extrajudicial slaughter in his country's ongoing drug war.

The president of the Philippines has now come out to publicly acknowledge his own role in the notorious drug war by personally partaking in the "Davao death squads" when he was mayor of Davao.

Referring to a vigilante group comprised of serving or former police officers paid per hit, Duterte framed his involvement in the death squads as serving a positive example for police officers to follow: "In Davao I used to do it personally. Just to show to the guys [police officers] that if I can do it, why can't you." Speaking on, his true intentions were not far behind: "I was really looking for a confrontation so I could kill."

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His "example" has clearly taken root. The Guardian reports that since his election, police have reported killing 2,086 people in anti-drug operations and more than 3,000 others have been killed in unexplained circumstances, according to official figures.

Even more concerning, Duterte has been callously encouraging civilians to kill addicts as well. His address to a crowd the day he took office even included the rallying cry "if you know of any addicts, go ahead and kill them yourself as getting their parents to do it would be too painful." Previously, Duterte's government had stated that the government did not sanction vigilante killings.

Not long ago, Duterte brought a case to the U.N. Tribunal regarding a dispute in the South China Sea. When China — the party against whom the case was lodged — refused to acknowledge the court's ruling, it was Duterte who immediately appealed for the rule of law to stand. Yet, here we

have a sitting president encouraging police and hired assassins to commit murder with impunity: Duterte has repeatedly pledged that police officers will not be prosecuted for extrajudicial executions.

The hypocrisy is astounding. Duterte's appeal to the applicability of the rule of law in the Philippines' international dispute, yet casual dismissal of its role domestically, makes a mockery out of the international legal system.

Duterte's easy willingness to bend the rule of law is also disturbing. His reference to the rule of law — a fundamental pillar of democratic society — as “just principles” which are subject to “innovation” and are sometimes a “stupid proposition” are troubling messages.

What's more troubling is that the Philippines' major and long-standing ally, the United States, is overall perplexingly quiet on the issue aside from issuing statements of concern. Instead, when the United States Ambassador to the Philippines met with President Duterte on Dec. 6, he vowed to strengthen the “friendship and alliance” between the U.S. and the Philippines.

Duterte's actions very likely constitute a crime under international law: in an October letter, the International Criminal Court chief prosecutor said she was “deeply concerned” over reports of thousands of extrajudicial killings in the Philippines, adding that “a widespread or systematic attack against a civilian population” may fall under the jurisdiction of the court.

On whether great powers abide by the rule of law, it is the scholar Graham Allison who famously posited that legal institutions are only for “small powers” and that “great powers” do not necessarily recognize them. However, Duterte's words and deeds reflect those of a “small power” acting with similar disregard towards the role of international law. Perhaps, then, Allison's model should be expanded to include not only “great powers,” but also “not-so-great powers, with great powers behind them.”

Christine Guluzian is visiting Research Fellow in Defense and Foreign Policy Studies at the Cato Institute.